

**The Influence of Prior Relationship on Perceptions of Stalking: A Comparison of  
Laypersons, Non-Specialist Police Officers and Specialist Police Officers**

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## **Biographical Sketches**

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## **Abstract**

The current research examined the influence of prior relationship on perceptions of stalking, and compared the perceptions of laypersons, non-specialist police officers and specialist police officers. Two studies employed experimental designs where participants were presented with one of three vignettes in which the nature of the prior relationship was manipulated so that the perpetrator and victim were portrayed as strangers, acquaintances or ex-partners. Participants comprised 101 non-specialist police officers and 108 laypersons in Study 1, and 49 specialist police officers and 49 non-specialist police officers in Study 2. Non-specialist police officers and laypersons shared the common misperception that stranger stalkers present a greater threat to the personal safety of their victims than acquaintance or ex-partner stalkers. Specialist police officers were less susceptible to common misperceptions, and believed that intervention was more necessary and that the perpetrator's behavior would cause the victim more alarm or personal distress than non-specialist police officers.

**Keywords:** stalking, harassment, perceptions, prior relationship, police

The Protection from Harassment Act (PfHA) 1997 was introduced in England and Wales to provide protection for the victims of stalking and other forms of harassment. The Protection of Freedoms Act 2012 (Commencement No. 2) Order 2012 has recently been laid down and new stalking provisions are now in force. These provisions allow power of entry in relation to stalking and the creation of two new offences, namely ‘stalking’ and ‘stalking involving fear of violence’. Prior to this Act, the term ‘stalking’ was not included in any legislation in England and Wales. Despite the presence of the PfHA 1997, tragic murders of women stalked by their ex-partners have occurred (for example, Clare Bernal in 2005 and Jane Clough in 2010). In both of these cases, the perpetrator was bailed after many incidents of stalking behavior and threats of violence. In the Clare Bernal case, an inexperienced probationary police officer dealt with the complaints of stalking made by Clare (Protection Against Stalking, 2012). Unfortunately, she assessed the case on the basis of her own judgments and due to a lack of training and guidance, underestimated the severity of the situation. These cases, and others in which the police made similar mistakes (for example, Katie Boardman in 2008 and Clare Wood in 2009), highlight the complex and chronic nature of stalking behavior and led to the recognition of a ‘training gap’ among police officers in the United Kingdom (Home Office, 2011). The current research examines the influence of prior relationship on perceptions of stalking, and compares the perceptions of laypersons, non-specialist police officers and specialist police officers.

A body of research reveals a potentially dangerous connection between the nature of the prior relationship, the persistence of the perpetrator and the risk to the victim in stalking cases (Weller, Hope, & Sheridan, 2013). For example, national crime surveys in the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia have reported that the majority of victims knew the perpetrator in some capacity prior to being stalked (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006; Catalano, 2012; Finney, 2006). According to the 2004/05 British Crime Survey,

approximately 65 percent of victims in England and Wales were stalked by someone known to them, 34 percent of whom were stalked by an ex-partner (Finney, 2006). Applied research has also demonstrated that ex-partner stalkers are often more persistent and violent than stranger stalkers using a variety of different participant samples, including perpetrators of stalking (e.g., James & Farnham, 2003; McEwan, Mullen, & MacKenzie, 2009; McEwan, Mullen, MacKenzie, & Ogloff, 2009; Rosenfeld & Lewis, 2005), victims of stalking (e.g., Pathé & Mullen, 1997; Sheridan & Davies, 2001) and perpetrator-victim pairs (e.g., Palarea, Zona, Lane, & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1999). However, it should be acknowledged that a recent survey by Sheridan and Roberts (2011) with self-identified victims of stalking found that ex-partner stalkers were only more violent than stranger stalkers when they had been physically abusive in the relationship.

Despite the majority of research indicating that ex-partner stalkers present a greater threat to the personal safety of their victims than stranger stalkers, there is evidence to suggest they are less likely to be arrested or convicted of stalking (Pearce & Eastal, 1999; Sheridan & Davies, 2001). Pearce and Eastal found that most police officers in their Australian sample would not use stalking legislation for cases involving ex-partners because they viewed the situations as ‘domestic’ and warranting less serious intervention. Furthermore, an evaluation of the use and effectiveness of the PfHA 1997 revealed that a greater proportion of cases referred to the Crown Prosecution Service for a decision on prosecution were dropped when they involved an ‘intimate’ (i.e., a current or ex-partner, family member or friend) rather than a stranger (41% vs. 0%) (Harris, 2000). This evidence is particularly concerning given that research examining levels of risk in the context of domestic violence incidents has identified ‘stalking’ as a risk factor for escalating violence and homicide (e.g., Aldridge & Browne, 2003; Campbell, 2004; Wilson & Daly, 1993).

Research in the United States has demonstrated that police officers rarely charge perpetrators of intimate partner stalking (IPS) with stalking, instead tending to charge them with the lesser offences of harassment or violation of a restraining order/injunction (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2001; Woodruff, 2010). Tjaden and Thoennes suggested that police officers may decide to charge perpetrators of IPS with lesser offences because they want to intervene at the earliest opportunity and stalking cases are more difficult and time-consuming to prepare. Research examining patterns of arrest decisions pertaining to domestic violence incidents has highlighted the importance of police officers' perceptions of the level of risk to the victim (e.g., Hall, 2005; Kane, 1999; Trujillo & Ross, 2008). For example, Kane found that police officers in his U.S. sample were more likely to make an arrest the higher the perceived level of risk (characterized by the use of a weapon). However, when the perceived level of risk to the victim was low, additional factors such as living arrangements and violations to restraining orders became important in the decision making process. Trujillo and Ross also found that police officers' arrest decisions were influenced by the perceived level of risk in their Australian sample. In this instance, perceptions of the level of risk to the victim were influenced by the presence and nature of previous incidents, the nature of the current incident and the victim's level of fear. Importantly, police officers tended to believe domestic violence incidents were one-off situations unless there was evidence of escalation.

It is useful to examine patterns of arrest decisions pertaining to domestic violence incidents as similar issues are likely to be present in stalking cases. Research examining perceptions of stalking is also relevant to developing an understanding of police officers' decision making. Perception research has revealed that laypersons (i.e., students and members of the public) generally perceive stranger stalkers to be more dangerous than ex-partner stalkers, contrary to findings from real stalking cases. For example, Hills and Taplin (1998) investigated the influence of prior relationship on perceptions of stalking from the

perspective of the victim. Participants were presented with a one-page vignette and asked to imagine that they were the victim of a series of events starting with the receipt of telephone calls and letters from a stranger, an acquaintance or an ex-partner. Participants were more likely to be frightened and to call the police when the perpetrator was portrayed as a stranger rather than an ex-partner. Similar findings have been reported by studies investigating the influence of prior relationship on perceptions of stalking from the perspective of an observer. Participants were more likely to believe behavior constituted stalking when the perpetrator and victim were portrayed as strangers rather than ex-partners (Cass, 2011; Phillips, Quirk, Rosenfeld, & O'Connor, 2004; Scott, Lloyd, & Gavin, 2010; Scott & Sheridan, 2011; Sheridan, Gillett, Davies, Blaauw, & Patel, 2003). Participants were also more likely to believe behavior necessitated police intervention and would cause the victim alarm, fear and mental or physical harm when the perpetrator and victim were portrayed as strangers rather than ex-partners (Scott et al., 2010; Scott & Sheridan, 2011).

A possible explanation for these findings is that perceptions reflect the workings of the just world hypothesis (JWH). According to the JWH, people are motivated to view the world as a safe place where people get what they deserve and deserve what they get (Lerner & Simmons, 1966). In the context of stalking, it is easier to mitigate the behavior of the perpetrator and assign responsibility to the victim when they are ex-partners rather than strangers because of their shared history (Sheridan et al., 2003). The influence of the perpetrator and victim's shared history is apparent in the perceptions of some Australian police officers who consider stalking to be the product of poor relationship choices (Pathé, MacKenzie, & Mullen, 2004). Furthermore, findings from perception research that the victim was perceived to be more responsible for encouraging the perpetrator's behavior when the perpetrator and victim were portrayed as ex-partners rather than strangers is consistent with this explanation (Scott et al., 2010; Scott & Sheridan, 2011; Sheridan et al., 2003). Social

constructions of stalking may also help explain why stranger stalkers are generally perceived to be more dangerous than ex-partner stalkers (Mullen, Pathé, & Purcell, 2001). As Mullen et al. pointed out, society is increasingly characterized by relationship instability and social distance. In this context, society's tendency to support men's attempts to sustain or re-establish relationships, together with society's general suspicion regarding the intentions of strangers, may contribute to the development and maintenance of this common misperception.

Although the misperceptions identified by perception research could affect police and discretionary decision making regarding the seriousness of stalking cases (Scott et al., 2010), little research to date has examined the influence of prior relationship on perceptions of stalking with police samples. Furthermore, most of the studies that have been conducted were policy driven with a focus on the effectiveness of legislation (Weller et al., 2013). Consequently, they have tended to use non-comparable stranger and ex-partner scenarios or have overlooked the influence of prior relationship altogether. For example, studies by Dussuyer (2000) and Farrell, Weisburd, and Wyckoff (2000) considered police officer perceptions of different situations by manipulating the nature of the prior relationship, but the ex-partner and stranger scenarios contained different behaviors. Research conducted by the Modena Group of Stalking also considered police officer (and general practitioner) perceptions of different situations by manipulating the nature of the prior relationship, but did not comment on the influence of prior relationship on perceptions of stalking (De Fazio & Galeazzi, 2004; Kamphuis et al., 2005).

As such, the only study to investigate the influence of prior relationship on perceptions of stalking with police (and layperson) samples is that of Weller et al. (2013). Weller et al. found that police officers and laypersons were more likely to believe behavior constituted stalking when the perpetrator and victim were portrayed as strangers rather than

acquaintances or ex-partners. They also found that police officers were more likely to believe behavior necessitated formal intervention and would result in injury to the victim than laypersons. Although the study enriched the existing literature by providing the first examination of the influence of prior relationship on police officers' perceptions of stalking, Weller et al. acknowledged that it was limited to the perceptions of non-specialist police officers drawn from one regional area within the United Kingdom. They commented that police forces in different regional areas are likely to have different training procedures that may influence how stalking is perceived and managed. They also suggested that specialist police officers with experience investigating interpersonal violence cases would be less susceptible to common misperceptions.

The current research comprises two studies that examine the influence of prior relationship (stranger, acquaintance and ex-partner) on perceptions of stalking. It builds upon the study of Weller et al. (2013) by comparing perceptions across police and layperson samples in Study 1, and across specialist and non-specialist police samples in Study 2, in a different regional area within the United Kingdom. Specifically, the two studies examine the influence of prior relationship and the respective sample memberships on perceptions of whether the perpetrator's behavior is considered to:

1. constitute harassment,
2. necessitate police intervention,
3. cause the victim alarm or personal distress, and
4. cause the victim to fear the use of violence.

The two studies also examine the influence of prior relationship and the respective sample memberships on perceptions of whether the victim is considered to:

5. be responsible for encouraging the perpetrator's behavior.

## Study 1

### Method

#### Participants

Non-specialist police officers and laypersons were invited to participate in a study on perceptions of behavior. The police sample was recruited with the assistance of senior officers in all divisions of a single police force in the United Kingdom. The senior officers circulated the questionnaires, collected the completed questionnaires and forwarded them to the researchers. The layperson sample was recruited by the second author. Students were approached in lectures and at the student canteen, while members of the public were approached at local council offices.

The police sample comprised 101 non-specialist officers (33% males and 67% females) with an average age of 33.88 years ( $SD = 8.19$ ). The layperson sample comprised 61 students and 47 members of the public (31% males and 69% females) with an average age of 29.02 years ( $SD = 12.38$ ). The non-specialist police officers were not located in Family Crisis Intervention or Domestic Violence Units, and had only received basic training in risk assessment and domestic violence. The average length of service was 10.78 years ( $SD = 6.97$ ), 85 percent were constables and 78 percent had experience of investigating stalking/harassment cases. There were between 35 and 38 participants in all experimental conditions except for the police-stranger condition which had 26 participants. The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical requirements of the British Psychological Society.

#### Materials

The study utilized a questionnaire that included a vignette; five scale items relating to perceptions of stalking; and questions concerning demographic information (whole sample: sex and age; police sample only: length of service and experience investigating

stalking/harassment cases). There were three versions of the vignette, representing the different prior relationship conditions: stranger, acquaintance and ex-partner. All vignettes described the same situation; the stranger vignette is provided below:

Linda first met John when she visited the estate agents where he works to renew the lease on her apartment. As Linda was leaving the office John asked if she would like to join him for lunch. Linda thanked him for the offer, but declined. During the three months that followed, John sent Linda between 5 and 10 text messages a day, many of these messages asking why she was not interested in him. John also approached Linda on her way to work and telephoned her at home. Linda asked John to stop calling her, but he continued to call her regularly. In the end Linda disconnected the phone and John left several messages blaming her for what was happening. Most recently, John arrived at Linda's home soon after she returned from work. Linda pretended that she was out.

In the acquaintance condition Linda and John had worked together for three months when he invited her to dinner. Linda thanked him for the offer, but politely declined. In the ex-partner condition Linda and John had been in a relationship for three months when she ended it. Linda realized they wanted different things from the relationship.

The five scale items, all measured on 11-point Likert scales, are detailed below:

1. To what extent does John's behavior constitute harassment? \* ('Definitely not harassment' to 'Definitely harassment')
2. To what extent does John's behavior necessitate police intervention? ('Not at all necessary' to 'Extremely necessary')
3. Do you think John's behavior will cause Linda alarm or personal distress? ('Definitely not' to 'Definitely')

4. Do you think John's behavior will cause Linda to fear that he will use violence against her? ('Definitely not' to 'Definitely')
5. To what extent is Linda responsible for encouraging John's behavior? ('Not at all responsible' to 'Totally responsible')

\* The term 'harassment' was used as opposed to 'stalking' as this was the term employed by English police officers following the dictates of the PfHA 1997.

### **Procedure**

All participants were informed that the study would take about 10 minutes to complete and would involve the reading of a one-paragraph vignette followed by the answering of scale items regarding their perceptions of the situation described. Participation was voluntary and debrief statements were provided upon completion of the questionnaire.

### **Results**

All statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 19. A 3 (prior relationship: stranger, acquaintance, ex-partner)  $\times$  2 (sample membership: non-specialist police officer, layperson) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed on the five scale items and significant main effects were obtained for prior relationship,  $F(10, 398) = 7.71, p < .001, \eta^2 = .16$ , and sample membership,  $F(5, 199) = 4.05, p = .002, \eta^2 = .09$ . There was also a significant interaction effect for prior relationship and sample membership,  $F(10, 398) = 3.17, p = .001, \eta^2 = .07$ . Further univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) utilizing Bonferroni corrected alpha values of .01 were performed on the individual scale items. The  $F$  ratios and significance are displayed in Table 1.

Although the MANOVA produced a significant interaction effect for prior relationship and sample membership, there were no significant interaction effects for the individual scale items at the Bonferroni corrected alpha value of .01. With regard to the significant main effects, prior relationship influenced perceptions of whether the perpetrator's behavior

constituted harassment,  $F(2, 203) = 23.92, p < .001, \eta^2 = .19$ , and necessitated police intervention,  $F(2, 203) = 18.54, p < .001, \eta^2 = .15$ . It also influenced perceptions of whether the perpetrator's behavior would cause the victim alarm or personal distress,  $F(2, 203) = 28.12, p < .001, \eta^2 = .22$ , and to fear the use of violence,  $F(2, 203) = 16.47, p < .001, \eta^2 = .14$ . Finally, it influenced perceptions of whether the victim was responsible for encouraging the perpetrator's behavior,  $F(2, 203) = 30.35, p < .001, \eta^2 = .23$ .

Post-hoc analyses (Tukey HSD) revealed significant differences across all three conditions for the harassment, alarm, violence and responsibility scale items (all  $p \leq .014$ ). The perpetrator's behavior was perceived to constitute harassment, and cause the victim alarm, personal distress and to fear the use of violence to the greatest extent in the stranger condition, followed by the acquaintance and ex-partner conditions. In contrast, the victim was believed to be most responsible in the ex-partner condition followed by the acquaintance and stranger conditions. With regard to intervention, the perpetrator's behavior was more likely to necessitate police intervention when the perpetrator was portrayed as a stranger rather than either an acquaintance or an ex-partner (both  $p < .001$ ). The descriptive statistics for prior relationship and sample membership are provided in Table 2.

Sample membership influenced perceptions of whether the perpetrator's behavior necessitated police intervention,  $F(1, 203) = 7.78, p = .006, \eta^2 = .04$ , and whether the victim was responsible for encouraging the perpetrator's behavior,  $F(1, 203) = 7.80, p = .006, \eta^2 = .04$ . Non-specialist police officers believed that intervention was more necessary and that the victim was less responsible than laypersons.

An additional MANOVA was performed on the police sample only to examine whether length of service and previous experience investigating stalking/harassment cases influenced perceptions. The 3 (prior relationship: stranger, acquaintance, ex-partner)  $\times$  2 (previous experience: yes, no) MANOVA with length of service entered as a covariate revealed no

significant main effects for previous experience or length of service,  $F(5, 89) = 1.30$ ,  $p = .270$ ,  $\eta^2 = .07$  and  $F(5, 89) = .81$ ,  $p = .546$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$  respectively. The interaction between prior relationship and previous experience was also non-significant,  $F(10, 178) = .75$ ,  $p = .681$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$ .

## **Discussion**

Prior relationship influenced perceptions of all five scale items across both samples. Non-specialist police officers and laypersons were most likely to believe the behavior constituted harassment, necessitated police intervention and would cause the victim alarm, personal distress and to fear the use of violence when the perpetrator was portrayed as a stranger. In contrast, they were least likely to believe the victim was responsible for the situation when the perpetrator was portrayed as a stranger. These findings are consistent with those of previous perception research (e.g., Hills & Taplin, 1998; Phillips et al., 2004; Scott et al., 2010; Scott & Sheridan, 2011; Sheridan et al., 2003; Weller et al., 2013).

Sample membership influenced perceptions of the intervention and responsibility scale items. Non-specialist police officers believed police intervention was more necessary and that the victim was less responsible for the situation than laypersons. The finding for intervention is consistent with that of Weller et al. (2013), and is encouraging as it indicates police officers are more inclined to take a proactive stance; perhaps contrary to the beliefs of many victims and the general population (see Pathé, Mullen, & Purcell, 2001). The finding for responsibility is also encouraging. Although police officers were less likely to believe the victim was responsible for the situation when the perpetrator was portrayed as a stranger rather than an acquaintance or ex-partner, they appear better able to appreciate the realities of stalking situations than laypersons. Recent research based on a large international sample revealed that victims of stalking did not report the situation to the police until an average of 35 incidents had occurred, and that 77 percent did not report the situation until over 100

incidents had occurred (Network for Surviving Stalking, 2009). It is important therefore that victims are encouraged to report incidents of stalking to the police earlier and that police officers take these reports seriously irrespective of the nature of the prior relationship.

## **Study 2**

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

The specialist police sample was recruited with the assistance of inspectors from five Family Crime Investigation Units in the United Kingdom. The inspectors circulated the questionnaires, collected the completed questionnaires and forwarded them to the researchers. The non-specialist police officers were randomly selected from the police sample used in Study 1.

The specialist police sample comprised 49 specialist officers (33% males and 67% females) with an average age of 36.08 years ( $SD = 8.99$ ). The non-specialist police sample comprised 49 non-specialist officers (31% males and 69% females) with an average age of 33.24 years ( $SD = 7.98$ ). The specialist police officers were located in Family Crime Intervention or Domestic Violence Units, and had received specialist training in risk assessment, child protection, domestic violence and stalking. The average length of service for specialist police officers was 12.10 years ( $SD = 7.78$ ), compared to 9.61 years ( $SD = 6.72$ ) for non-specialist police officers. Eighty percent of specialist police officers were constables compared to 88% of non-specialist police officers, and 88% of specialist police officers had experience of investigating harassment cases compared to 78% of non-specialist police officers. There were between 16 and 17 participants in all experimental conditions. Again, the research was conducted in accordance with the ethical requirements of the British Psychological Society.

## Materials and Procedure

The materials and procedure were the same as those described in Study 1.

## Results

Again all statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 19. A 3 (prior relationship: stranger, acquaintance, ex-partner)  $\times$  2 (sample membership: specialist police officer, non-specialist police officer) MANOVA was performed on the five scale items and significant main effects were obtained for prior relationship,  $F(10, 176) = 4.22, p < .001, \eta^2 = .19$ , and sample membership,  $F(5, 88) = 6.31, p < .001, \eta^2 = .26$ . There was also a significant interaction effect for prior relationship and sample membership,  $F(10, 176) = 3.14, p = .001, \eta^2 = .15$ . Further univariate ANOVAs utilizing Bonferroni corrected alpha values of .01 were performed on the individual scale items. The  $F$  ratios and significance are displayed in Table 3.

There were significant interaction effects for the harassment,  $F(2, 92) = 9.65, p < .001, \eta^2 = .17$ , and responsibility scale items,  $F(2, 92) = 8.71, p < .001, \eta^2 = .16$ , so separate ANOVAs were performed for specialist and non-specialist police samples. These analyses showed that prior relationship only influenced non-specialist police officers' perceptions of the harassment,  $F(2, 46) = 13.05, p < .001, \eta^2 = .36$ , and responsibility scale items,  $F(2, 46) = 18.57, p < .001, \eta^2 = .45$ . Post-hoc analyses (Tukey HSD) revealed that non-specialist police officers were more likely to perceive the perpetrator's behavior to constitute harassment when the perpetrator and victim were portrayed as strangers ( $M = 9.82$ ) rather than either acquaintances ( $M = 8.13, p = .001$ ) or ex-partners ( $M = 7.88, p < .001$ ). Furthermore, non-specialist police officers were more likely to believe the victim was responsible for encouraging the perpetrator's behavior when they were portrayed as ex-partners ( $M = 2.56$ ) rather than either strangers ( $M = .12, p < .001$ ) or acquaintances ( $M = 1.13, p = .003$ ). In contrast, specialist police officers' ratings on the harassment (stranger  $M = 9.71$ , acquaintance

$M = 9.75$ , and ex-partner  $M = 9.69$ ) and responsibility scale items (stranger  $M = .29$ , acquaintance  $M = .50$  and ex-partner  $M = .63$ ) were not significantly different across the three conditions.

There was also one significant main effect for prior relationship and two significant main effects for sample membership. Prior relationship influenced perceptions of whether the perpetrator's behavior would cause the victim alarm or personal distress,  $F(2, 92) = 12.98$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .22$ . Post-hoc analyses (Tukey HSD) revealed that the perpetrator's behavior was perceived to cause the victim more alarm or personal distress when they were portrayed as strangers rather than either acquaintances or ex-partners ( $p < .01$  and  $p < .001$  respectively). The descriptive statistics for prior relationship and sample membership are provided in Table 4.

Sample membership influenced perceptions of whether the perpetrator's behavior necessitated police intervention,  $F(2, 92) = 10.59$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $\eta^2 = .10$ , and would cause the victim alarm or personal distress,  $F(2, 92) = 12.03$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .12$ . Specialist police officers believed that intervention was more necessary and that the perpetrator's behavior would cause the victim more alarm or personal distress than non-specialist police officers.

An additional MANOVA was performed to examine whether length of service influenced perceptions. It was not possible to include previous experience in the analysis because its inclusion violated the sample size assumption that the number of cases in each cell needs to exceed the number of dependent variables (Pallant, 2007). The 3 (prior relationship: stranger, acquaintance, ex-partner)  $\times$  2 (sample membership: specialist police officer, non-specialist police officer) MANOVA with length of service entered as a covariate revealed no significant main effect for length of service,  $F(5, 87) = .24$ ,  $p = .944$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ .

## **Discussion**

Prior relationship only influenced perceptions of the alarm scale item across both samples. Specialist and non-specialist police officers were most likely to believe the behavior would cause the victim alarm or personal distress when the perpetrator was portrayed as a stranger. However, prior relationship still influenced perceptions of the harassment and responsibility scale items in the non-specialist police sample. Non-specialist police officers were most likely to believe the behavior constituted harassment, and were least likely to believe the victim was responsible for the situation when the perpetrator was portrayed as a stranger. Again, these findings are consistent with those of previous perception research (e.g., Hills & Taplin, 1998; Phillips et al., 2004; Scott et al., 2010; Scott & Sheridan, 2011; Sheridan et al., 2003; Weller et al., 2013). Sample membership influenced perceptions of the intervention and alarm scale items. Specialist police officers were more likely to believe the behavior necessitated police intervention and would cause the victim alarm or personal distress than non-specialist police officers. The findings of Study 1 indicated that non-specialist police officers were better able to appreciate the realities of stalking situations than laypersons. The findings of Study 2 indicate that the encouraging findings of Study 1 are further intensified by specialization, as specialist police officers appear to be less biased in their interpretations of gendered crimes.

### **General Discussion**

The current research comprised two studies and examined the influence of prior relationship on perceptions of stalking, comparing perceptions across police and layperson samples as well as across specialist and non-specialist police samples. Study 1 revealed that non-specialist police officers and laypersons were more likely to believe the behavior constituted harassment, necessitated police intervention and would cause the victim alarm, personal distress and to fear the use of violence when the perpetrator and victim were

portrayed as strangers rather than acquaintances or ex-partners. In contrast both samples were less likely to believe the victim was responsible for the situation when the perpetrator and victim were portrayed as strangers rather than acquaintances or ex-partners. These findings are consistent with those of previous perception research and reflect the common misperception that stranger stalkers present a greater threat to the personal safety of their victims than acquaintance or ex-partner stalkers (Hills & Taplin, 1998; Phillips et al., 2004; Scott et al., 2010; Scott & Sheridan, 2011; Sheridan et al., 2003; Weller et al., 2013). More encouragingly, non-specialist police officers believed police intervention was more necessary and that the victim was less responsible for the situation than laypersons.

Study 2 revealed that specialist and non-specialist police officers were more likely to believe the behavior would cause the victim alarm or personal distress when the perpetrator and victim were portrayed as strangers rather than acquaintances or ex-partners. Furthermore, non-specialist police officers were more likely to believe the behavior constituted harassment when the perpetrator was portrayed as a stranger rather than an acquaintance or ex-partner; and were more likely to believe the victim was responsible for the situation when the perpetrator was portrayed as an ex-partner rather than a stranger or acquaintance. The significant findings for non-specialist police officers are consistent with those of Study 1, while the comparative lack of significant findings for specialist police officers are consistent with Weller et al.'s (2013) suggestion that specialist police officers with experience investigating interpersonal violence cases would be less susceptible to common misperceptions.

With regard to the JWH, laypersons and non-specialist police officers perceived the victim to be more responsible when the perpetrator and victim were portrayed as ex-partners rather than strangers or acquaintances. These findings are consistent with previous perception research (Scott et al., 2010; Scott & Sheridan, 2011; Sheridan et al., 2003) and indicate that

the victim is perceived to share responsibility for the situation when the perpetrator is portrayed as an ex-partner. Sheridan et al. (2003) suggested that perceptions of shared responsibility might reduce the likelihood of police intervention as both parties can be left to resolve the situation themselves. However, it is important to acknowledge that non-specialist police officers perceived the victim to be less responsible for the situation than laypersons, and that there were no differences in perceptions of responsibility across the different prior relationship conditions for specialist police officers.

The recognition of a 'training gap' among police officers led to extensive improvements in the amount and quality of training relating to gendered crimes within police forces in the United Kingdom (Home Office, 2011). In the context of domestic violence, Hoyle and Sanders (2000) found that the majority of female victims in their U.K. sample believed they had benefitted from the emotional and practical support provided by specialist police officers. Specifically, the provision of support encouraged victim participation in the prosecution process. Furthermore, it has been suggested that the introduction and use of risk assessment tools facilitate a more strategic response to domestic violence incidents (Hoyle, 2008). It is important to note, however, that the benefits associated with the use of specialist police officers are dependent on the availability of adequate resources, and that risk assessment tools have been criticized for being overly prescriptive (Hoyle, 2008; Hoyle & Sanders, 2000; Radford & Gill, 2006).

The complex and chronic nature of stalking behavior make it a particularly difficult crime to investigate. As such, police officers need to be made aware of the serious risks associated with stalking behavior, even in the absence of a long-standing physically abusive relationship, or when the perpetrator is not a threatening stranger. The findings of Study 2 highlight the benefits of training, as specialist police officers were less susceptible to common misperceptions than non-specialist police officers. Simple structured triage tools

may also be useful for police officers investigating stalking cases. In the United Kingdom, Sheridan and Roberts (2011) developed a single page tick-box assessment tool that seeks to prevent common misperceptions from influencing police officers' decision making (e.g., by indicating that ex-partner stalkers present a greater risk of violence). The tool was designed to be used by all police officers, irrespective of their experience and/or training.

It is important to acknowledge that the current research used a limited sample of specialist police officers and that all samples were drawn from one regional area in the United Kingdom. Furthermore, it only included a dichotomous measure of whether specialist and non-specialist police officers had experience investigating stalking/harassment cases. Additional research is necessary therefore with a larger more representative sample to determine whether specialist training or increased exposure to the investigation of gendered crimes has the greatest influence on perceptions of stalking. Although stalking and domestic violence have many similarities, additional research is needed to examine if and how specialization in domestic violence cases impacts upon police decision making in the context of stalking cases. Data from the National Violence Against Women Survey in the United States identified very few real similarities between the police treatment of domestic violence and stalking cases (Jasinski & Ehrhardt Mustaine, 2001). Further research is also needed to examine the influence of perpetrator and victim sex with the use of longer, more detailed vignettes. Thompson, Dennison, and Stewart (2012) found that relational stalkers (i.e., stalkers who engage in unwanted behavior following relationship terminations or during the pursuit of relationships) were more accepting of female-perpetrated violence than male-perpetrated violence and highlighted that if police officers hold similar beliefs they may be less likely to respond to male victims especially when the perpetrator is female. In addition, Sinclair (2012) argued that the use of longer vignettes provides participants with richer

material to draw upon when trying to understand and explain the behavior of the perpetrator and victim.

In summary, the current research suggests that non-specialist police officers and laypersons share the common misperception that stranger stalkers present a greater threat to the personal safety of their victims than acquaintance or ex-partner stalkers. Despite this common misperception, non-specialist police officers were more likely to believe police intervention was necessary and less likely to believe the victim was responsible for the situation than laypersons. Furthermore, specialist police officers were less susceptible to common misperceptions and even more likely to believe police intervention was necessary than non-specialist police officers. They were also more likely to believe the perpetrator's behavior would cause the victim alarm or personal distress than non-specialist police officers. The findings highlight the importance of educating police officers about the common misperceptions regarding stalking and the need for further research to determine whether specialist training or increased exposure to the investigation of gendered crimes are effective ways of reducing these biases.

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Table 1

*Multivariate and Univariate Analyses of Variance F Ratios for the Five Scale Items by Prior Relationship and Sample Membership (Non-Specialist Police Officer, Layperson)*

Variable	ANOVA					
	MANOVA	Harassment	Intervention	Alarm	Violence	Responsibility
	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i>
Relationship	7.71 <sup>***</sup>	23.92 <sup>***</sup>	18.54 <sup>***</sup>	28.12 <sup>***</sup>	16.47 <sup>***</sup>	30.35 <sup>***</sup>
Sample	4.05 <sup>**</sup>	3.53	7.78 <sup>**</sup>	.15	.49	7.80 <sup>**</sup>
R × S	3.17 <sup>**</sup>	3.66	2.86	1.38	.86	.19

*Note.* *F* ratios are Wilk's Lambda approximations of *F*s. MANOVA = multivariate analysis of variance; ANOVA = univariate analysis of variance. Bonferroni corrected alpha value = .01. <sup>\*\*</sup>  $p < .01$ , <sup>\*\*\*</sup>  $p < .001$ .

Table 2

*Means and Standard Deviations for the Five Scale Items as a Function of Prior Relationship and Sample Membership (Non-Specialist Police Officer, Layperson)*

Condition	Five scale items									
	Harassment		Intervention		Alarm		Violence		Responsibility	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<b>Relationship</b>										
Stranger	9.32 <sub>a</sub>	.86	8.26 <sub>a,b</sub>	1.45	9.40 <sub>a</sub>	.80	8.26 <sub>a</sub>	1.66	.40 <sub>a</sub>	.74
Acquaintance	8.45 <sub>a</sub>	1.27	6.82 <sub>a</sub>	1.88	8.51 <sub>a</sub>	1.48	7.30 <sub>a</sub>	2.01	1.26 <sub>a</sub>	1.61
Ex-partner	7.84 <sub>a</sub>	1.62	6.31 <sub>b</sub>	2.35	7.51 <sub>a</sub>	1.87	6.35 <sub>a</sub>	2.14	2.45 <sub>a</sub>	1.99
<b>Sample</b>										
Police	8.61	1.36	7.41	1.56	8.41	1.50	7.29	1.82	1.16	1.47
Layperson	8.38	1.50	6.75	2.47	8.44	1.81	7.21	2.33	1.68	1.99

*Note.* For prior relationship, column means sharing subscripts are significantly different ( $p < .05$ ). The five scale items utilized 11-point Likert scales.

Table 3

*Multivariate and Univariate Analyses of Variance F Ratios for the Five Scale Items by Prior Relationship and Sample Membership (Specialist Police Officer, Non-Specialist Police Officer)*

Variable	ANOVA					
	MANOVA	Harassment	Intervention	Alarm	Violence	Responsibility
	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>F</i>
Relationship	4.22 <sup>***</sup>	9.51 <sup>***</sup>	3.73	12.98 <sup>***</sup>	4.40	14.84 <sup>***</sup>
Sample	6.31 <sup>***</sup>	30.67 <sup>***</sup>	10.59 <sup>**</sup>	12.03 <sup>***</sup>	.98	14.43 <sup>***</sup>
R × S	3.14 <sup>**</sup>	9.65 <sup>***</sup>	3.07	2.82	.80	8.71 <sup>***</sup>

*Note.* *F* ratios are Wilk's Lambda approximations of *F*s. MANOVA = multivariate analysis of variance; ANOVA = univariate analysis of variance. Bonferroni corrected alpha value = .01. \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table 4

*Means and Standard Deviations for the Five Scale Items as a Function of Prior Relationship and Sample Membership (Specialist Police Officer, Non-Specialist Police Officer)*

Condition	Five scale items									
	Harassment		Intervention		Alarm		Violence		Responsibility	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<b>Relationship</b>										
Stranger	9.76	.61	7.91	1.64	9.65 <sub>a,b</sub>	.65	8.38	1.76	.21	.48
Acquaintance	8.94	1.29	7.06	1.74	8.69 <sub>a</sub>	1.42	7.09	2.16	.81	1.18
Ex-partner	8.78	1.54	7.13	1.79	8.19 <sub>b</sub>	1.58	7.31	1.73	1.59	1.62
<b>Sample</b>										
Specialist	9.71	.71	7.90	1.45	9.27	1.19	7.80	2.07	.47	8.92
Non-specialist	8.63	1.47	6.86	1.88	8.45	1.49	7.43	1.84	1.24	1.52

*Note.* For prior relationship, column means sharing subscripts are significantly different ( $p < .05$ ). The five scale items utilized 11-point Likert scales.